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SUBJECT: MACAU RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: REVERSION WAS ONLY THE
BEGINNING

Classified By: Consul General Joe Donovan for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment: According to representatives of several of Macau's major religious communities, Macau's 1999 reversion to PRC rule allowed other faiths to gain equal status with the formerly state-supported Catholic Church. The Buddhist and Protestant communities now receive government grants to provide social services like the Macau Catholic Diocese does. Buddhists and Daoists have also been granted land for religious purposes. Relations among the faiths were uniformly described as cordial. Politically, the Catholics remain the most influential, although the Buddhists and Daoists report Chief Executive Edmund Ho makes a point of attending their events, as does the Central Government Liaison Office (CGLO). CGLO supports Macau's religious communities' contacts with co-religionists on the Mainland and the annual Baha'i dialogue with the PRC State Administration for Religious Affairs. CGLO's engagement with Macau religious communities may represent an interest in the role of independent religions in a more open society and/or "united front" work meant to forestall the rise of "anti-China" critics among religious communities. End summary and comment.

12. (SBU) We spoke with representatives of Macau's major religious faiths April 29, to hear their perspectives both on community development and their relationship with the Macau Special Administrative Region Government (MSARG). Leaders we met include:

- The Reverend Lam Yam-man, Chairman of the Evangelical Church Hong Kong and Macau District, and Pastor-in-Charge of the Macau Evangelical Church's Main Church;
- The Venerable Sik Kin-chin, Chairman, the Macau Buddhist Association, and Master of the Pou Tai Monastery;
- Bishop Jose Lai, the Macau Catholic Diocese;
- Dr. Kong Siew-huat, Chairman; and Ms. Tsui Siu-hing, Community Relations director; the Macau Baha'i Community; and
- Master Ng Pei-Chun, Chairman, Macau Daoist Association; and Mr. David Cheung Kin, Daoist community member.

Protestants: Several Denominations Active

13. (C) Protestant Community Leader Rev. Lam Yam-man assured us that, since the 1999 reversion, Macau is the "freest place in the world" in terms of religion. Religious communities are not even required to register to begin operations. (Note: Macau's pre-reversion 1998 "Law on Religion and Religious Service," which remains in force, allows religions to register as social organizations but does not appear to explicitly require them to do so. End note.) While not banned, Rev. Lam reports Protestants as marginalized prior to Macau's reversion, since only the Catholic church enjoyed formal status. Primary education was dominated either by Catholic schools or "patriotic" (i.e. pro-communist) schools, at neither of which were Protestants particularly welcome.

¶4. (SBU) Rev. Lam reports a Protestant population of about 10,000, of whom 5,000 are active in Anglican, Evangelical and Pentecostal communities. His own Evangelical community is an indigenous tradition begun by a former Anglican minister in 1950. While the community's Bible academy does not confer ordination, Lam told us Macau Evangelical authorities are able to certify their own clergy. Since 1999, Protestant communities have been able to register to provide social services (like Hong Kong, the MSARG subsidizes a range of organizations to provide social services under government guidelines). His own church is active mainly in youth tutoring, and also provides some care to seniors. Other than subsidies for these activities, however, Rev. Lam receives no support from the government, and acquires property for the community at commercial rates. There are no restrictions on proselytizing, and Rev. Lam reports his community passes out pamphlets in the streets without hindrance. Rev. Lam reports inter-faith relations are good, although his community does not participate in many joint activities.

¶5. (SBU) Rev. Lam reports his church has been in active contact with Mainland communities through the official China Christian Council, sponsoring community development in Yunnan province. The church has also provided secular aid in Sichuan, mainly medical and senior care. Rev. Lam also told us many Macau Protestant communities have links with foreign co-religionists.

Buddhists: Short on Clergy

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¶6. (C) Master Sik echoed Rev. Lam in reporting a better environment for religious communities since the handover. Chief Executive (CE) Edmund Ho has been a visible supporter of the community, which Master Sik believes represents a commitment to traditional Chinese culture following reversion. The Central Government Liaison Office (CGLO) also attends their larger public functions. Unlike the Protestants, the Buddhists have received a grant of land from the government for community purposes, although they are still negotiating the actual size of the parcel (Master Sik reports CE Ho himself committed to looking into the matter on behalf of the community.) Since 1997 (i.e. before reversion), the Buddhists have been active in providing social services, but Master Sik told us the real growth has been over the last three years. The community has one primary school serving 500 students, and Master Sik's monastery provides meals and care to seniors. Buddhist communities have a framework organization, but Master Sik reports their resources rest with the individual temples. Numbers of Buddhists are difficult to estimate, since while there are few truly active and devout Buddhists, many who occasionally pray in temples or attend rituals might identify themselves as Buddhists.

¶7. (C) The Buddhist community has had difficulties in training new clergy. While the community will usually produce one candidate a year, Master Sik reports, if they send the individual abroad to Taiwan or elsewhere for training, the candidates usually do not return. As a result, while some training occurs in Macau, the community often asks larger communities on the Mainland (he specifically mentioned Shanghai) to provide clergy and lay workers on a temporary basis. Master Sik told us the CGLO complains if they are not informed of requests to Mainland communities, but does not otherwise interfere in the exchanges.

¶8. (C) The Po Tai monastery established a branch in Hawaii prior to 1999, which Master Sik confided to us represented a hedge against a possible change in Macau following its return to Chinese rule. At this point, however, the community has no concerns. Clergy still enjoy the opportunity to visit the facility in Hawaii, which Master Sik implied offered monks a

kind of working vacation.

Catholics: Now Equals, but Still First

¶9. (C) As the largest provider of education and, through Macau Caritas, social services, the Catholic Church remains the most influential religious community in Macau. The Macau Diocese claims 30,000 practitioners, although Bishop Lai estimates a third of his flock are Filipino domestic helpers.

While the Bishop told us the community produces candidates for the priesthood (which are trained locally or at Hong Kong's Holy Spirit Seminary), he has also brought in some parish priests from overseas. The Diocese is now actively recruiting for both clerical and lay "vocations." In addition to his links to the Vatican and the larger world Catholic community, Bishop Lai reports he is able to maintain links with Mainland Catholics through the CGLO without problems. The Diocese has worked to establish a program of religious studies at Macau's Inter-University Institute (IIUM in Portuguese), which it is working with Mainland authorities to make available to Mainland clergy for training.

¶10. (C) While not taking the same public profile of his former Hong Kong counterpart Cardinal Joseph Zen, Bishop Lai reports the Diocese does take public positions on some issues. The Diocese has two regular publications, one of which represents the Bishop and another open to wider discussion among members of the community. On issues such as Macau's recently-passed Article 23, the government itself reached out to the Diocese for its views.

Baha'i: Annual Dialogue with China's SARA

¶11. (SBU) Macau's Baha'i community Chairman Kong told us the community has 2,500 practitioners, served by four official centers and about fifty home worship sites. The community has also received government support for its "School of the Nations", which they claim represents Macau's first international school and which has a 2/3 English, 1/3 Mandarin curriculum. In keeping with Baha'i traditions, the community places particular emphasis on participation in interfaith activities, which Chairman Kong told us are often organized by CGLO.

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¶12. (C) Much to our surprise, Chairman Kong told us the community has a dialogue with China's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), with annual meetings in Macau and Beijing on a rotating basis. SARA, Kong said, has been represented on some occasions by Director Ye Xiaowen. Kong attributes this interest to the Baha'i message of harmonious existence among all people as well as their core doctrine of obedience to secular law. On the Mainland, Kong reports that, while Baha'i centers serving foreigners are required to check passports of those attending events, there are also indigenous communities operating.

Daoists: Strong Government Support

¶12. (C) Like the Buddhists, Master Ng told us the numbers of Daoist practitioners are extremely hard to estimate. The community acknowledges 40 temples of all types, including 30 specifically Daoist temples, as serving their community. There is a new interest in Daoism as part of a larger societal interest in traditional Chinese culture following Macau's reversion, and the community is attempting to meet this demand through public outreach. In that respect, Master Ng and Mr. Cheung told us the government, from CE Ho down, has supported the community by providing land and grants

through government-run foundations. The government also makes well-trafficked public spaces available to the Daoists and other religious communities for outreach activities. On the other hand, Master Ng told us the decline of the fishing industry has cost the community a core demographic, since fisherman patronized Daoist temples for protective rites and to worship the Daoist-affiliated folk deity Mazu (or Tin Hau). Master Ng told us that, since the community lacks the means to support a full-time clergy, Masters tend to work at some other full-time job to earn a living. There are no formal ordainment procedures, so Master Ng was only able to estimate a clerical population of about 20.

Comment: The CGLO Connection

¶13. (C) We would expect the CGLO to wish to manage relations between Macau's free and independent religious communities and their state-controlled co-religionists on the Mainland, but we were frankly surprised at the sincerity with which Macau communities praised CGLO's support and patronage of their events in Macau. Why CGLO should take on this role is at present unclear to us, but we will venture two hypotheses. First, quiet and relatively apolitical Macau may furnish central government authorities with a relatively tame venue to observe the role of independent religious communities in a generally open society, which in turn may factor into the development of Mainland religious policy. The Mainland's interest in IIUM as a venue for training Catholic clergy, despite its affiliation with the Vatican-controlled international Catholic community, would lend credence to this notion, as would SARA's dialogue with the Baha'i. Second, central authorities may have concluded that cultivating friendships with the communities would be the best way to forestall the rise of "hostile" figures in the religious communities along the lines of Hong Kong's Cardinal Zen.
DONOVAN